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ABSTRACT

The writing skills of 71 college seniors were assessed at a medium-sized public university. Blind scoring, a standard scoring guide, and trained graders were used. Curricular writing emphasis was assessed through a syllabus study, yielding a curricular emphasis score. The academic records of these students revealed the number of courses taken in each discipline, and a weighted sum was derived for each student with weighting by the percent of syllabi for courses taken that showed "strong emphasis" in writing in each discipline. Controlling for entry-level skill in writing, writing score and curricular emphasis were highly correlated. Implications for assessment practice are discussed. (SLD)

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Writing Across the Curriculum Works: The Impact of Writing Emphasis upon Senior Exit Writing Samples

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Abstract:

Seniors' writing skills were assessed in 1998 at a medium-sized public university. Blind scoring, a standard scoring guide, and trained graders were used. Curricular writing emphasis was assessed through a syllabus study, yielding a Curricular Emphasis Score. Controlling for entry-level skill in writing, Writing Score and Curricular Emphasis were highly correlated. Implications for assessment practice are discussed.

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Writing Across the Curriculum Works:
The Impact of Writing Emphasis upon Senior Exit Writing Samples

Objectives of the Session: The authors have attempted to couple a concern for the assessment of writing skills with support for the aims of writing across the curriculum. We will try to engage the audience in the innovative methods that were brought together in this research. These methods included those adopted by a university writing program for the assessment of students' progress and assessment methods applied to the curriculum that students experience on the way to graduation.

Background: The presentation will review writing across the curriculum and some of the difficulties involved in assessing its impact upon students. We will present methods adopted in this and similar research to attempt to overcome these difficulties. Our methods brought to bear an independent outside assessment of the writing-intensiveness of the curriculum. Further, our methods allowed for individualized measurement of the writing intensiveness for students' particular courses of study.

Outline of Method: A syllabus method was developed by one of the authors and presented at a previous VAG conference. The method requires the collection and review of syllabi for all, or almost all, courses in the undergraduate curriculum. Each syllabus is rated by an independent rater on a 3-point scale to measure the degree of emphasis on a number of process variables, in this case, writing skill. Specific indicators are used, e.g., number of assigned papers during the term. Evidence of the validity and reliability (inter-rater and stability) of this method will be brought out.

For the writing outcome measure, a sample (N = 71) of the graduating seniors was recruited to participate in a senior exit test or writing sample. Students were selected from the list of prospective graduates, using a sampling plan designed to guarantee a good representation of subjects who transferred in freshman writing course credits and those who took those courses at the institution

The writing sample followed the same procedures and used the same test as was used by freshman writing students for the final of the spring term. Grading also followed the same structured procedures as used for freshmen. A standard, structured Scoring Guide was used and all graders, teachers of freshman English, were trained for grading consistency. Scoring was done blind, i.e., without knowledge of senior vs. freshman status. Other data were obtained for statistical purposes. More details can be provided later.

The academic records of these students revealed the number of courses taken in each discipline. A weighted sum for each student, with weighting by the percent of syllabi that showed "strong emphasis" on writing in each discipline from the syllabus study, yielded a Curricular Emphasis Score.

Outline of Results: Correlations among all variables were examined with a view toward predicting skill in writing. For summary purposes, the Total Score will be used in

this proposal in place of the other six writing outcome variables, of which it is the composite. Total Score correlated significantly with freshman English grades (.43), cumulative GPA (.38), and SAT-Verbal (.57). In addition, freshman English grades correlated .58 with the cumulative GPA. All correlations were highly significant.

The role of transfer was also examined. The differences between participants who transferred their freshman English credits from another institution and those who took their English at the university were not statistically significant. These results were consistent with those found in a 1997 writing study.

For 25 students randomly selected to derive a Curricular Emphasis Score, the correlation between that score and the Total Score on the writing test was $r = .40$, $p < .05$. To control for entry-level skill in writing a partial correlation was conducted on Curricular Emphasis and Total Score on the Writing Test, using SAT-Verbal scores as the controlled variable. The partial r was .78, $p < .001$.

Major Conclusion: The real message is that of the title of our presentation: "Writing Across the Curriculum Works." We believe our study has overcome at least some of the obstacles that stand in the way of making such a claim with confidence, if not certainty. Professors of English as well as many others, who believe in and care deeply about fostering writing ability in college, and who have labored toward this end for many years, can be encouraged by these results.

The authors bring to the presentation a rare combination of assessment perspectives and a professional focus on the improvement of writing. The cross-fertilization of ideas, leading to several innovative assessment methods, should be stimulating to most conference attendees. Both the findings and the methods should have applicability across most institutions.

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The Impact of Writing Emphasis Upon Senior Exit Writing Samples

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The Syllabus Study

Method

- Syllabi were reviewed for evidence of seven "process" variables
  - written communication, oral communication, problem-solving, computer applications, mathematical applications, international perspectives, and diverse perspectives
  - Scored on a 3-point scale
    - No Emphasis - no evidence that the process variable was being addressed in the course (which does not necessarily mean that it was not - just that the syllabus didn't reflect it)
    - Some Emphasis - some evidence that the process variable received some attention at some point in the semester (e.g., a lecture on an international topic, one writing assignment, an emphasis on oral participation in class)
    - Strong Emphasis - evidence that the process variable received emphasis throughout the semester (e.g., International Finance, Psychology of Sex and Gender, an accounting course with problem-solving throughout the semester)
      - for written communication, strong emphasis was defined as two or more papers
      - for oral communication, strong emphasis was defined as an oral presentation to the class

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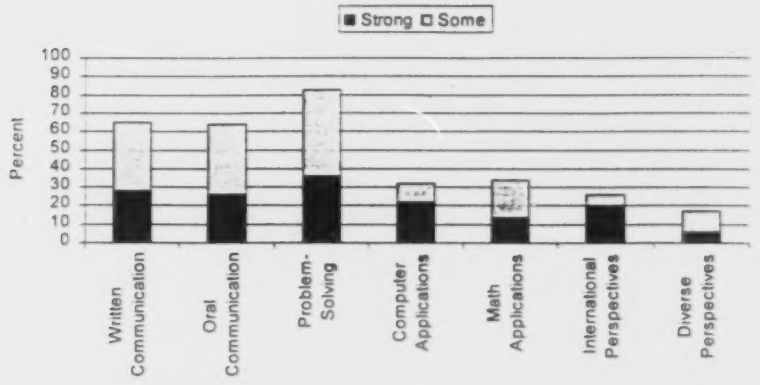
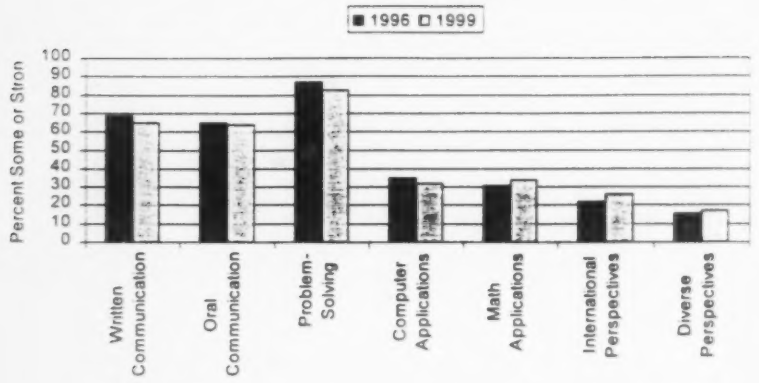
Results of the 1999 Syllabus Study
Christopher Newport University



From 528 syllabi in 1999

Comparison of the 1996 and 1999 Syllabus Studies
Christopher Newport University



From 407 syllabi in 1996 and 528 syllabi in 1999
All Chi Squares < 2, non-significant differences

Conclusions

- Curricular emphasis on these seven process variables has not changed significantly between 1996 and 1999
  - at least as reflected in the syllabi
- Two-thirds of CNU courses incorporate written communication and oral communication
  - about one-fourth incorporate two or more writing assignments and about one-fourth incorporate oral presentations
- More than 80% incorporate active problem-solving
- About one-third incorporate computer applications and mathematical applications, and one fourth incorporate international perspectives

The Writing Study

Method

- In the spring of 1998, writing samples were taken from 71 seniors using the same writing prompt
  - similar data were available from samples of seniors from 1995 and 1997
  - (seniors in the 1997 sample had higher GPAs and SAT Verbal scores, and perhaps because of this, tended to score higher on the writing samples)
- Essays were scored by several faculty members from the Department of English, using a 5-point scale
  - 0 = failing
  - 1 = below average
  - 2 = average
  - 3 = above average
  - 4 = superior

Dimensions of Scoring Guide

Dimension:	Definition:
Summary of reading (Content)	Understands Author's Central Thesis and Purpose Covers Main Points Concisely Accurately Represents Original
Critique of Reading (Content)	Evaluates the Author's Central Thesis and Purpose Critiques the Main Points of the Argument Evaluates the Strategies of the Author
Personal Response to the Reading (Content)	Develops a Thesis that Guides the Response Supports the Thesis with Examples and Evidence Draws Inferences and Makes Connections

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Dimensions of Scoring Guide

Dimension:	Definition:
Structure	Introduces Content with a Sense of Purpose and Focus Builds Orderly, Developed Paragraphs Establishes Coherence with Logical Transitions Concludes with a Sense of Focus and Meaning
Correctness	Employs Quotations from the Readings Correctly Demonstrates Understanding of Grammar Uses Conventional Punctuation Demonstrates an Understanding of Mechanics and Spelling
Style	Draws from Varied and Complex Vocabulary Varies Sentence Patterns Exhibits Clarity and Concision

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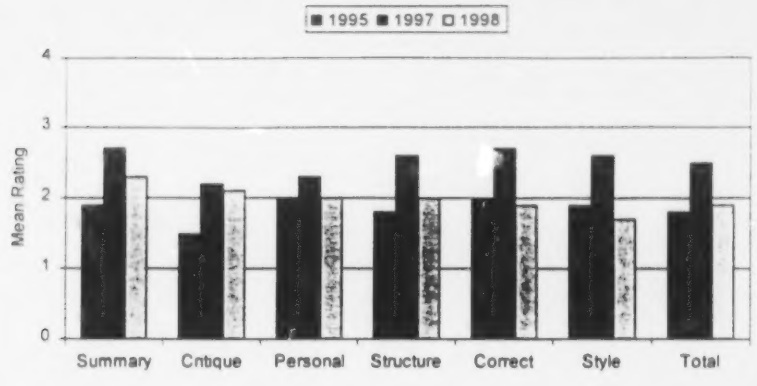
Results from the 1995, 1997 and 1998 Studies of Writing

Christopher Newport University



From 60 seniors in 1995, 93 seniors in 1997, and 71 seniors in 1998

Predicting Skill in Writing
Correlation Matrix

	Freshman ENGL Grade#	Cum GPA	SAT-Verbal	Total Score
Freshman ENGL Grade#	1.00			
Cum GPA	.58*	1.00		
SAT Verbal	.27	.24	1.00	
Total Score	.43*	.38*	.57*	1.00

*Correlations significant at the .01 level,
these correlations are very similar to those found for the 1997 sample
#Average of two Freshman English course grades

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Correlations between Mean ENGL Grade and GPA for Students who had Transferred ENGL and Students who had taken ENGL at CNU

	Transfer ENGL#	CNU ENGL#
CNU GPA	.37*	.54*
Transfer GPA	.62*	.47
Cumulative GPA	.59*	.54*

*Correlations significant at the .01 level.
#Average of two Freshman English course grades

Comparison of Transfer ENGL and CNU ENGL

	Freshman ENGL Grade#	Total Writing Score
Transfer ENGL	M = 2.77	M = 2.01
CNU ENGL	M = 2.55	M = 1.85

As was true for the 1997 writing sample, these differences are not statistically significant.
#Average of two Freshman English course grades. Means for TNCC transfer students are 2.80 for ENGL grade and 1.87 for Total Writing Score

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Comparison of Transfer and Native Students

	Freshman ENGL Grade#	Total Writing Score
Transfer Students	M = 2.74	M = 1.96
Native Students	M = 2.52	M = 1.95

As was true for the 1997 writing sample, these differences are not statistically significant
#Average of two Freshman English course grades. Native students had no transfer credits

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Curricular Emphasis and Skill in Writing

- For a sample of 25 of these students, a Curricular Emphasis Score was derived by determining the number of courses taken in each discipline and weighting by the percent of syllabi that showed Strong Emphasis on Writing in each discipline (from the Syllabus Study)
- This Curricular Emphasis Score was then correlated with the Total Score on the Writing Test for these 25 students
  - r = .40. p = .05
- To control for entry-level skill in Writing, a Partial Correlation was conducted on Curricular Emphasis and Total Score on the Writing Test, using SAT-Verbal scores as the controlled variable
  - r = .78, p = .001

Conclusions

- Mean grade in Freshman English courses, cumulative GPA, and SAT-Verbal scores all correlate significantly with an independent assessment of writing skills of seniors
- There are no significant differences on this senior assessment of writing skills between native and transfer students
  - or between students who had taken Freshman English at CNU or elsewhere
- Curricular emphasis on writing correlated significantly with this senior assessment of writing skills
  - this correlation was even stronger after controlling for differences in entry-level writing skills as measured by SAT-Verbal scores

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